

English as a Lingua Franca —
the current situation and its implications

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1. Introduction

...if there is one predictable consequence of a language becoming a global language, it is that nobody owns it any more. Or rather, everyone who has learned it now owns it — ‘has a share in it’ might be more accurate — and has the right to use it in the way they want.

(Crystal, 2003 : 2-3)

In these extraordinarily fast-changing times facts and figures may become obsolete no sooner than they reach the printed page, but according to recent estimates (Payack, 2008), within a world population of over six billion people there may be no fewer than half a billion native speakers of English (compared to over a billion of Mandarin Chinese) and well over a billion speakers of a ‘global English’ (whose precise definition is not provided) which is the only language to be spoken on all five continents. It is also the native language of over a third of those with internet access worldwide *and* actual internet users (possibly double the number of Chinese speakers). Crystal (Op. Cit.) proposed a figure of one billion people learning English in the Expanding Circle (see Chapter 3 below), which has doubtless expanded even further since 2003. While population decline in the Inner Circle and continued migration is likely to have an increasing effect on the statistics (native speakers of Hindi and Urdu forecast to overtake those of English by 2050, with

Spanish and Arabic following not far behind — Graddol, 1997 : 26-7) the USA alone was still seen as home to nearly 70% of all native English speakers (Crystal, Op. Cit.).

On the one hand, the use of English as a global lingua franca requires intelligibility and the setting and maintenance of standards. On the other hand, the increasing adoption of English as a second language, where it takes on local forms, is leading to fragmentation and diversity. No longer is it the case.... that English unifies all who speak it.

(Graddol, Op. Cit. : 3)

This study proposes to examine the relatively recent emergence of English as a Lingua Franca as a viable linguistic concept applicable to the growing use of the language for international communication between speakers of different nationalities worldwide. Firstly, in a field apparently littered with confused and confusing labels, can a clear definition be found, distinguishing it from other seemingly overlapping categorisations? Secondly, in practical terms, how and where can its current use be witnessed, and how extensively and in what directions might this spread in the future? Finally, what might the implications be for the participants themselves, and for all those involved in the study, learning, teaching and use of the English language in whatever shape or form?

2. English as a Lingua Franca — definitions and distinctions

One of the unanticipated achievements of the 21st century was the rapid diffusion of Basic English as the lingua franca of the world and the even more rapid modification, expansion and spread of English in its wake...

(H. G. Wells, in *A Shape of Things to Come*, 1933)

ELF would seem to be an entirely logical and natural development arising out of new language contact situations in expanding circle contexts as a result of the changing role of English. (Jenkins, 2007 : 5)

Global English, World English (plural optional), English as an International Language, English as a Lingua Franca (apparently distinguishable from International English and Lingua Franca English), English as a Nativised Language...it appears that a particular branch of linguistics has, for the past decade or more, been afflicted with what Anchimbe (2009 : 284) describes as “a naming disease”. A glance at the bibliography of this paper will reveal titles including many of the labels above (although Ogden’s ‘Basic English’ has become an increasingly rare reference point since Wells’ contemporary interest), sometimes collected within a volume using an alternative term on the cover. While not wishing to become trapped in circular arguments over nomenclature, it may prove beneficial, however, to look at some of these categories more closely for distinctive signs, on occasion possibly shared, particularly in that with which the current paper is most concerned, namely English as a Lingua Franca (henceforth also referred to as ELF).

2.1 ELF *not* EFL

As one of its principal proponents, Jenkins has prefaced key works on the subject (2000, 2007 and 2009) with a number of definitions and descriptions which are consistent in their statement of various aspects of EFL. Nearly a decade on there still appears to be the initial need to explain “what it is and what it is *thought* to be” (2007 : 1, current author’s emphasis), while giving a succinct summary of what constitutes a lingua franca :

...a contact language used among people who do not share a first language...commonly understood to mean a second (or subsequent) language of its speakers. (ibid.)

Two years later and further information is provided regarding use of ELF, especially by linguists in the UK and Europe, “in describing communicative interactions among mainly...NNSs (Non-Native Speakers)...who use English as their chosen tool for communication in international and intercultural settings” (Murata & Jenkins, 2009 : 4). Later in the same collection of essays, Jenkins herself makes some helpful contrasts between ELF and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) with regard to the former’s placement within ‘World Englishes’ as communication between speakers of *different* first languages (L1s) and its standard of proficiency involving the skilled use of many varieties of English, in addition to opposing views of deviations and code-switching. While ELF is seen as a positive bilingual (or multilingual) resource, EFL is identified by its rather more neutral to negative “metaphors of transfer, interference and fossilization” (Jenkins, 2009 : 42) in relation to NS (Native Speaker) norms. The question of the changing status of the NS will prove to be an inseparable secondary theme in this study, continuing well beyond the exposition here.

Seargeant (2009 : 109) also observes differences in the two categories via the application of Gardner & Lambert’s division of motivational types (1972). On the one hand, EFL can be seen as *integrative*, with the ultimate goal of joining the target language speech community, while on the other, ELF is more concerned, *instrumentally*, with breaking down the barriers of the various speech communities to which its participants belong.

Before seeking some refuge from this plethora of abbreviations (terms, as Kirkpatrick comments, often conjured up by academics in monolingual societies, 2007 : 9), the prevalence of choice (for learners and speakers) as a fundamental element in discussions of ELF seems also worthy of note. Jenkins (2007 : 19)

includes the accusation of monocentrism, that is the attempt to establish a single lingua franca norm as model, in her chapter on the misinterpretations of ELF that abound. On the contrary, it is argued that its *non*-prescriptive nature, describing alternatives (as opposed to the advocacy of one particular variety) to NS hegemony, that allows students to make decisions regarding their own needs for ELF, EFL or any other strand. Thus it is not only providing but effectively increasing learner choice, whether it be EFL or ENL for those still wishing to use NS models, or ESL or ELF for those more interested in international communication on a NNS to NNS basis. It perhaps should be remembered that compared with much of the study of other languages, “most people quite simply do not learn English to speak to native-speakers” (Prodromou, 1997 : 19).

Continuing efforts to provide pedagogical resources (Jenkins’ own Lingua Franca Core of international phonology - LFC) and empirical data for ELF (Seidlhofer’s VOICE project — the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca) are relevant to discussions of its future in Chapter 4 below. For the following section the focus of this paper will turn to the current situation in more practical terms, with particular reference to attitudes to the study and use of English in Japan.

3. Current use of ELF and the situation in Japan

English is...used for a range of pragmatic and personal reasons...because the people see how useful it is for social and economic advancement...because it is the language of international trade...because it is the major language of technology, education and popular culture.
(Kirkpatrick, Op. Cit. : 180)

3.1 Asia and Europe — some comparisons

It is apparent from a large number of studies published under any of the categories listed at the start of Chapter 2 above that the use of English in Asia, particularly in the East, is preoccupying much of current academic discussion. From a linguistic viewpoint, the vast continent is of special interest with its unique array of neighbouring states often coming from two contrasting ‘Circles’ of English speakers (Kachru, 1985), namely the Outer and Expanding, and the sheer numbers and speed of change in countries such as China represent an almost unmanageable source of potential data (while those with a more cynical view of the ELT industry as a whole might also point to the region being seen as an almost limitless source of potential profit).

In Outer Circle countries such as India, English can be seen as a unifying force linking mostly multilingual speakers of Hindi or Bengali *and* English, for example, a lingua franca-type role currently also demonstrated by standard Mandarin within China in the Expanding Circle, not forgetting the strong urban concentration and accompanying social connotations of such multilingualism. An oft-cited example is that of ASEAN (the Association of South-East Asian Nations, established in 1967) where the use of English as the lingua franca for official dialogue between members of the Outer Circle (such as the Philippines and Singapore) and Expanding Circle (Thailand, Vietnam and others) was a natural choice made apparently without debate (Kirkpatrick, Op. Cit. : 155).

Parallels are often drawn with practice in the EU (the European Union which has expanded to close to 30 countries from the half dozen original founders of the EEC back in 1957) and the emergence of an identifiable ‘Euro-English’ within its workings (Crystal, Op. Cit. : 183). Although differences clearly exist in the

respective onsets and outcomes, the co-operative approach, at least linguistically, in both organisations gives rise to an apparent ability to overcome potential obstacles to communication (ignoring the incorrect or unfamiliar — what Firth describes as the “let it pass” concept, 1996 : 243), with the realisation that clarification might not necessarily be required where understanding can be established from the context, or in some cases, even if not.

With English possibly undergoing a transformation into “the front-line language” for different East Asian groups (Abley, 2009 : 76), a purely contact language beyond previous pidgins but with similarly simplified grammar and phonology evident in the ELF templates discussed elsewhere in this article, what of the situation in Japan? Could the equivalent of Singlish, having taken firm root as a new variety in spite of the continued efforts of many in Singapore’s ruling elite, ever develop in the country that cyberpunk author William Gibson (2001) described as “global imagination’s default setting for the future”?

3.2 Japan and English — official views

The hybrid speech that many young people now favour in Japan may well embody the most radical incursion English has yet made on another widely spoken language.

(Abley, Op. Cit. : 103)

Interestingly, in the country most familiar to the current author, it is not only teenagers that favour the use of foreign, largely English expressions, however modified, but also government bureaucrats (ibid. : 114), an unlikely coalition in the global spread of the language. Why is English such a permanent fixture in Japanese imagination’s default setting for internationalisation, and does this bear any

relation to the lingua franca model presently under discussion ?

Entering the new millennium, official pronouncements from the Prime Minister's Commission (CJGTC) were already describing English as "not...simply a foreign language but as *the* international lingua franca" (2000 : 10, emphasis added) and as a device with which to access foreign culture, soon counterbalanced by its promotion as a tool enabling the dissemination of Japan's *own* culture to the world, beyond the "Frontier Within" of the report's title (Honna, 2009). Thus, in 2003, we find the MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) "Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" reiterating, through frequent repetition of the term, the function of English as a "common international language", although the extent to which it could possibly have achieved its stated aim to establish better ELT in the country within five years warrants debate that space does not allow here.

However, Seargeant (Op. Cit. : 59-60) raises questions about whether the type of communication taught in English classes might be rather different from that in general Japanese society, and ultimately that if there is a need to alter that society in order for English learning to take place then the foreignness of the language is effectively being reaffirmed rather than diminished. By 2006, the pendulum could indeed be seen to have swung back in the direction of tradition in the description by then Minister of Education, Bunmei Ibuki, of English classes as being "sweets and cakes" only to be offered (here to elementary school pupils) after the "protein and starch" of the Japanese language have been consumed and fully digested.

3.3 The Japanese and English — unofficial attitudes

In order to ascertain the attitudes of Japanese learners to different varieties of

English, particularly in relation to discoveries that have been made regarding the effects of phonology on comprehension and the symbiotic link between such attitudes and intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000 & 2007 respectively), an existing listening exercise in the general course textbook, *Impact Conversation 1* (Sullivan & Beuckens, 2009), being used by three 1st year university classes (75 non-English majors, representing a reasonably typical cross-section of lower-ability students at the end of their first term, post-senior high school) was adapted to include a simple question regarding whether the speakers heard on the accompanying CD were easy or difficult to understand after additional cloze sentence completion tasks were undertaken. The original worksheet, with certain annotations, is provided in the Appendix at the end of this paper, and the responses received are shown in Table 1 below.

1. Hispanic	2. Japanese	3. Australian	4. American	5. Korean
easy : difficult	easy : difficult	easy : difficult	easy : difficult	easy : difficult
39 : 25	35 : 19	26 : 49	7 : 56	15 : 46

1. British	2. British	(as per 4. above)	4. Chinese	5. American
easy : difficult	easy : difficult		easy : difficult	easy : difficult
7 : 50	6 : 50		7 : 49	6 : 54

Table 1

Number of Japanese 1st year university students expressing an opinion about whether speakers in textbook listening exercises were easy or difficult to understand (character names in original - see Appendix - replaced by accent types above)

It is apparent from the data that the NS examples were found uniformly difficult to understand, as were the two other NNS Asian varieties (Australian and Korean are the only deviations from notably consistent ratios for all the other negative ratings), with only the Hispanic and Japanese speakers regarded as “easy” to comprehend by a clear majority of students. Perhaps this last outcome vindicates Jenkins’ findings

that “the majority of phonetic approximations seem to lead to foreign accent alone rather than to unintelligibility” (2000 : 36), with the implication that native-like pronunciation need no longer be the ultimate goal. Obviously differences in the actual scripts or the speed and clarity of individual delivery must also be considered as potentially strong influences on the results obtained.

Would it be pushing the boundaries of convenient use of survey responses (a question mark frequently hanging over attitudinal research) to claim, even tentatively, that the lower ranking of Inner Circle and other Expanding Circle examples here represents the conflict within the Japanese view of an English-speaking reality in which “they have an inferiority complex about their pronunciation ... toward NSs, and meanwhile a superiority complex toward NNSs in the world” (Morizumi, 2009 : 85) ?

Such are the dangers inherent in the interpretation of any information gained in this manner, and what might be deemed over-familiarity with its sources, although it should be noted that the apparently inconsistent feelings described above have been heard expressed by numerous learners of all ages and abilities on their return from travel abroad, particularly the latter, critical of fellow NNSs. One might also ask where the cooperative, accommodating approach fundamental to ELF can be found in such views.

Japanese	American	British	Canadian	Chinese	Korean	‘Asian’
24	14	12	4	2	2	1

Table 2

Easily-understood English speakers according to Japanese 1st year university students

When asked a final question regarding the English speaker(s) they have found the easiest to understand in all their contact with the language thus far (from teachers to tour guides, performers to politicians), some of the choices shown in Table 2 above can be seen to both confirm and contradict the results of the listening exercises. Again with no intention of making overblown claims from essentially a very simple ad hoc survey, but the large majority indicating Japanese as most comprehensible (in a 2 : 1 ratio to the second choice, American) does match the slightly surprising outcome earlier. There are also some doubts as to whether so many students would have necessarily thought of answering with NNS types had Japanese not been suggested as a possible response via brief mention of examples such as “your English teacher at junior high school”. The complete absence of Australian from the selection would imply that direct contact via education or travel was less of a factor, though a more detailed questionnaire would additionally need to try and gather such information about any reasons for the answers provided.

A more general interpretation might be useful in the context of the present discussion. Overall, when adding neighbouring nations to by far the most popular single choice, Japanese, and combining the almost equal preferences for American and British English with the minority mention of Canadian, then an even split (29 : 30) between Asian NNS and Western NS varieties can be witnessed. It could be argued that this perhaps encapsulates, however unscientifically, the dichotomy between the established image of the prestigious Inner Circle (still largely monopolised by US and UK forces) and some signs of an emerging, albeit possibly unconscious, appreciation that positive elements can be found even in their own and other Expanding Circle Englishes.

4. Implications for the future

The quotation from H. G. Wells' prescient work prefacing Chapter 2 above actually concludes as follows :

On the whole it was more difficult to train English speakers to restrict themselves to the forms and words selected than to teach outsiders the whole of Basic.

(A Shape of Things to Come, 1933)

Prodromou (2007 : 51) raises valid questions about the role of teachers in promulgating ELF cores as a practical alternative to Standard English norms and precisely what kind of correction strategies, if any, might be expected in the classroom. In such circumstances it would seem unlikely that NSETs (Native Speaking English Teachers — Sharifian, 2009) would be expected to exclusively use the ELF equivalent of 'Basic', any more than they would be able to avoid learners finding and possibly wishing to use NS variations in their own speech and writing.

Broadly speaking, proponents of ELF consistently maintain that it is by no means intended as an abridged version of the language, a substandard level to be somehow prescribed to unwitting learners. Widdowson (in Howatt, 2004 : 361) provides a typical defence :

...there is no suggestion that any reduction should be imposed, but that the modified forms of the language which are actually in use should be recognized as a legitimate development of English as an international means of communication.

Nevertheless, others remain unconvinced, with Holliday (2009 : 27) seeing this as

a noteworthy flaw in the sociolinguistically supportive regime which ELF aspires to be, demonstrating an aspect in which

...the linguistic philanthropy of the English as a lingua franca movement may be construed as failing. It may well be that the establishment...of a bland international code, which in some aspect claims a reduction in linguistic difficulty and cultural rootedness, would appear undesirable to a group of people for whom it is largely designed, if they are at the same time suffering from prejudiced perceptions of their linguistic and cultural ability.

ELF has also been criticised for its apparent downgrading of idiomatic usage of NS English as being both irrelevant for most lingua franca speakers and perhaps even impossible to teach anyway (Seidlhofer & Widdowson, 2009 : 31).

However, it would appear to be the explicit readjustment of (monolingual) NSs' position within the new hierarchy that remains most controversial. One suggestion is that the traditional NS versus NNS division may be replaced by recognition of individual proficiency (Yano, 2009 : 220), whereby English language education gains renewed significance. Governments and employers need to recognise the increasingly strong case for bilingual NNSETs (Non-Native Speaker English Teachers) to be considered ideal role models for students, linguistically and otherwise (Kirkpatrick, Op. Cit and Matsuda, 2009) and that, in general, trained and able NNSs (the undoubted majority of teachers worldwide), might finally be valued more appropriately in comparison with untrained NSs. It can be argued that they may also be in a far better position to translate global thinking into local action with respect for their students' actual needs and sensitivity to their situation, shared, by definition, as it is (McKay, 2002 : 128).

But, as with so many aspects of education, and seemingly with English

language teaching in particular, all the theoretical debate must finally be recognised as no more than that, especially considering the pertinent point made, in admittedly rather theoretical terms, by Pennycook (discussing Canagarajah, 2007) that

...lingua franca English does not exist outside the realm of practice ; it is not a product but a social process...constantly being remade from the semiotic resources available to speakers, who are always embedded in contexts and who are always interacting with other speakers. (2009 : 205)

5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide an admittedly cursory overview of the concept of English as a Lingua Franca and its progress, particularly over the past decade. Questions of terminology which still seem to preoccupy much discussion of the subject have been examined, alongside current aspects of usage in a number of locations. Especial focus was placed on attitudes to language displayed in Japan, and their influence on the likelihood of ELF thinking and practice becoming better established there.

The effect of ELF and other related theories of international communication upon the status of the 'Native Speaker', and ultimately the traditional distinctions of 'us' and 'them' it inherently implies, clearly raises fundamental issues for all those concerned with language and culture. It is reasonable to suppose that many other aspects of established linguistic theory are likely to require re-evaluation if they are to maintain any relevance in this rapidly changing world.

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Appendix :

Listening activity (Impact Conversation 1) & accent attitude survey

(Key to speakers : (H)ispanic, (J)apanese, (A)ustralian, (K)orean, (C)hinese, (UK), (US)) and correct completions added)

Unit 11 P. 52 Listening Extra

Do you think each speaker’s English is easy or difficult to understand ? (circle one)

1. Carlos (H)	2. Eri (J)	3. Trish (A)	4. Scott (US)	5. Soon (K)
easy/difficult	easy/difficult	easy/difficult	easy/difficult	easy/difficult

Now try to complete these phrases with what you hear on the CD :

1. **Carlos** : “...the weather in England is always overcast and not so good.”
2. **Eri** : “I went on exchange last year to America. And it was really good.”
3. **Trish** : “...we have Chinese food here, but it’s just not the same.”
4. **Scott** : “...I didn’t miss TV at all. And now I don’t even own a TV.”
5. **Soon** : “I went to a language school in Canada in the summer holiday...”

Unit 14 P. 65 Listening Extra (as above)

1. Emma (UK)	2. Simon (UK)	(3. Scott)	4. Sheng-Li (C)	5. Pia (US)
easy/difficult	easy/difficult		easy/difficult	easy/difficult

1. Emma : "...they haven't really tried. If you cook long enough, you will get good at it."

2. Simon : "I'd love to be able to cook. But I don't think I have it in me."

3. Scott : "Well, I can't really say that I'm a good cook."

4. Sheng-Li : "...you name it. The secret is to buy fresh seafood."

5. Pia : "...without burning it black. I just didn't know how to cook."

*Finally, thinking of **all** the English you have **ever** heard (from teachers to movie stars !), what nationality was the person you could understand best ?*

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